

CRITICAL ACTION LEARNING

Critical action learning (CAL) is a contemporary development of action learning which holds that learning and organizational development can be advanced when the power and emotional dimensions of learning are treated centrally as a site of learning about managing and organizing and learners draw from critical ideas to make connections between their individual and work experiences. The potential for criticality in action learning derives from the tensions, contradictions, emotions and power dynamics that inevitably exist both within a group and in individual managers' lives.

Overview of entry

This entry provides an outline of the origins, traditions and key ideas of critical action learning (CAL). Examples of applications are illustrated before concentrating on the particular relevance to action research.

Origins, traditions and key ideas

The term 'critical action learning' can first be found in print by Hugh Willmott in a 1994 paper that called for greater application of critical thinking to management education and development. The concern in CAL is that learning be seen as a means for individual or collective transformation or emancipation and not simply confined with performance improvement. CAL has a number of distinguishing features, including: its emphasis on the way that learning is supported, avoided or prevented through power relations; the linking of questioning insight to complex emotions, unconscious processes and relations; a more active facilitation role than implied within traditional action learning. Key ideas

in CAL are critical reflection, organizing insight, learning inaction, systems psychodynamics and active facilitation.

Traditional Action Learning

Action learning is underpinned by the central assumption that learning derives from taking action and asking insightful questions about urgent problems or enticing opportunities. Action learning was formulated around the formula, $L=P+Q$ where L stands for learning, P for programmed knowledge (i.e. existing theory) and Q for questioning insight. Formal instruction and theory is not sufficient. External training, instruction or expertise is not relied upon, because existing codified knowledge, whilst it may be drawn from, may not suit the specific context of a particular problem. Processes such as action and feedback, asking fresh questions, learning from and with peers and creating a multiplier effect between individual and organizational learning are central to action learning.

The objectives of action learning, as originally expressed by Revans, are:

- 1) To make useful progress on the treatment of some real problems or opportunities
- 2) To give participants sufficient scope to learn for themselves with others, and
- 3) To encourage teachers and others engaged in management development to help participants to learn with and from each other.

Based on a philosophy of action (praxeology), action learning is a challenging educational method that is much more than simply learning by doing, in that it engages participants in risk-taking experimentation and a degree of self-challenge, on the basis that a person cannot expect to change others or an organisation if they cannot change themselves.

Critical Reflection

Although reflection is integral to the classical principles of action learning, this is often interpreted to mean simply an instrumental encouragement of participants to think about their individual experience of action, as in for example, ‘what did I do? What happened? What went well? What would I do differently next time?’ This emphasizes the rational, but excludes the emotional and political aspects of the learning process. Purely instrumental reflection neglects that action and learning are always undertaken in a context of power and politics, which inevitably carries potential for conflict, anxiety, and obstruction of learning. In response to this critique, CAL is a development of conventional action learning in that it aims to promote explicit critical thinking, giving recognition to the way politics and emotion are integral to organizing, as well as to the role they can play in facilitating and constraining the scope for learning. Critical reflection as a pedagogical approach emerges because these dynamics are treated centrally as a site of learning about managing and organizing.

Critical reflection engages deeper reflection on assumptions, values and unquestioned norms held about organisational and personal practices. Recognition is given to the ways in which the daily realities of participants are always undertaken in a context of power

and politics, which inevitably gives rise to conflict and tension. Critical action learning is a development of conventional action learning in that it aims to promote a deepening of critical thinking, giving explicit recognition to the role that politics and emotions can play in facilitating or constraining, the scope for learning and organizing. Critical reflection engages participants in a process of drawing from critical perspectives to make connections between their learning and daily work experiences, to identify the assumptions governing their actions, to locate the historical and cultural origins of their assumptions, question their meaning, and develop alternative ways of thinking and acting.

Key to this process is the emphasis on collective as well as individual reflection, going beyond simple reflection on action (learning from experience), to learning from organizing through reflection on existing organizational, political and emotional dynamics created in action. Part of the critical reflection process is to challenge the prevailing social, political, cultural, or professional ways of acting. Through the process of critical reflection, adults come to interpret and create new knowledge and actions from their ordinary and sometimes extraordinary experiences. Critical reflection blends learning through experience with theoretical and technical learning to form new knowledge constructions and new behaviors or insights.

Four activities constitute critical reflection:

1. Assumption analysis – thinking in such a manner so as to challenge our beliefs, values, cultural practices, and social structures in order to assess their impact on

- our everyday practices, and recognize our core assumptions about the order of the world.
2. Contextual awareness – Realizing that our assumptions are socially and personally created in a specific historical and cultural context.
 3. Imaginative speculation – Imagining alternative ways of thinking about phenomena in order so as to challenge our predominant ways of knowing and acting.
 4. Reflective scepticism - Questioning universal truth claims or unexamined patterns of interaction through the above three activities.

Systems Psychodynamics

Central to a psychodynamic understanding of learning from experience is the idea of learning from unconscious phenomena. Systems psychodynamics illuminates a distinction in organizing between behaviours and activities informed by rational task performance and those connected to emotional needs and anxieties. Psychodynamics in CAL draws attention to psychoanalytic defensive mechanisms, using concepts like repression, projection, pairing and regression, and links these to learning and organizing. An interest in unconscious processes, challenges the assumption that improvement process are necessarily rational and raises questions about the extent to which accepted practices within an organization regarding learning and innovation, for example, are the result of unconscious processes that promote defensive attitudes, protectionism and dismissal of new ideas as potentially threatening. As such CAL highlights that learning

is connected to political processes and power relations, at an individual, group and organizational level.

Action learning is inevitably a site of emotions because of its integral challenge and experimentation. This is supplemented within formal learning environments by the characteristic of inverting the traditional dependency of the learners on the teacher, through emphasizing the responsibility of the learners for themselves. It is anxiety provoking not to be taught or told because it means that the learner is confronted with responsibility for what and how he or she needs to learn.

Emotions are a source of significant learning in three ways: firstly, critical reflection has potential to disturb or to provoke dissonance amongst participants. Secondly, the processes of organizing that comprise the dynamics of action learning sets often provoke a range of emotions, from frustration to excitement. Attending to and making sense of these is a rich source of experiential learning about organisational behaviour. Thirdly, the process of critical reflection provides language and concepts which help people acknowledge and make sense of feelings they may have long carried, but ignored, for example, over tensions and contradictions they experience in life and/or work.

Collective Reflection

Key to CAL is the shift of emphasis from individual to collective reflection, learning from recognizing, discussing, and potentially transforming the social power relations central to organizing. Action learning has usually viewed the action learning set as the primary vehicle for collaboration, where work-based issues are addressed and

organization change achieved through questioning and reflection. CAL gives explicit recognition to ways in which action learning sets themselves become arenas for the interplay of emotional, political, and social relations, in that they can mirror the range of inequalities, tensions, and emotional fractures that characterize groups, organizations, and societies. In this sense it is the process of combining critical reflection with action learning that carries potential for learning and change. Psychodynamic insights show how the action learning set can be a parallel process in which the set dynamics play out as a microcosm of the wider organization/system. Dynamics within the set often mirror patterns and behaviors in the wider organization, for example, in how particular members respond to conflict and diversity, or whether or not they position the facilitator as an authority figure to react against. If the set comes to understand its own behaviors this can provide valuable insights into the wider organizational/systemic life of which its members are part. Not only can this lead them to identify what might need to change, but the set can also be a place for action, in that it is itself a social community in which people can begin to organize differently.

Acknowledging the emotional experience of attempts to learn within a learning set encourages members of the set to question not only their own behaviour and practice, but also to analyse collective emotional dynamics as a way of understanding characteristic power relations, for example across an organization, and to recognize how these might facilitate or limit learning.

CAL has also been employed for organisation or systemic change by connecting action learning sets in dialogue with each other. Parallel to the engagement of individual managers in their own inquiries, problem-solving and developmental journeys, collective critical reflection also aims to engage with the wider power relations, for example, by being voiced to senior managers.

Organizing Insight and Learning Inaction

Action learning has usually viewed the 'action learning set' as the primary vehicle for collaboration, where work-based issues are addressed through questioning and reflection. CAL gives explicit recognition to ways in which action learning sets themselves become arenas for the interplay of emotional, political and social relations, in that they can mirror the range of inequalities, tensions and emotional fractures that characterise groups, organizations and societies. Vince's concept of '*organizing insight*' emphasizes the relationship between action learning and organizational learning and inquiry into the power and emotion within the organization dynamics in which action learning takes place. This illuminates the importance of critical collaboration, in other words the opportunity to examine the politics that surround and inform choices and decisions which constitute organizing.

In practice, for example, the facilitator might observe within a group that the pattern of interactions is dominated by some, whilst one or two individuals are barely listened to. The facilitator might simply pose a question as to the significance of this. If the question

resonates with group members it may be used to initiate a discussion on power and status within the group, perhaps extending to parallels within the immediate organisation or network. As another example, an individual's presenting anger on their immediate resource problems at work might be widened through peer or facilitator questioning, to help them locate their own situation in a broader context.

CAL makes a further contribution to organization change through the insight of *learning inaction* which highlights ways in which organization behaviours and practices can restrict and discourage learning, through, for example, always prioritizing action over reflection; acting for the sake of action and at the expense of learning.

Facilitation in Critical Action Learning

The value and role of facilitators, or set advisers, occupies distinctive territory in CAL. They are commonly, though not always used within traditional action learning groups, with a role to model the peer challenge/critical friend behaviours, to help the group establish ground rules, and develop questioning, reflective, and inclusive team practices. Revans himself was ambivalent about the use of facilitators, because of his principle that participants have the expertise to solve their problems themselves and should not become dependent on external expertise or facilitation. However, in CAL, the implication is for a more active facilitation role, so as to illuminate the ways in which participants reinforce behaviors or power relations that sustain learning inaction. While traditional facilitation promotes reflection focused on the immediate presenting details of a task or problem, critical facilitation is concerned with promoting a process of critical reflection on the

emotional and political processes with the group dynamics and making conscious the social, political, inaction professional, economic, and ethical assumptions underlying participants' actions. Supplementing this experiential learning with theoretical learning to form new knowledge, behaviors, and insights, facilitation within CAL also places importance on supporting transfer of the resultant learning to practice both inside the group and outside within the wider organization.

Examples

CAL has been integrated into management education programmes, such as MBAs, for example, by integrating the social and political dimensions of learning, by according 'task' and 'process' issues equal importance. Participants draw from critical literature to explore parallels between the power dynamics, (for example, the dynamics of gender or race) they experience within their action learning groups and their work organization. Students may be asked to reflect critically on their development as a manager, and are introduced to critical ideas, drawing on feminism, Foucault's ideas on power and concepts of critical education based on Habermas and Giroux. Through questioning their assumptions and the source of these, they develop new perspectives on ways of being a manager; they reach a transformed perspective of themselves through making new connections between patterns of thinking or behaviour at work, at home and in the programme.

To accept that engaging with group dynamic emotions and associated feelings of fear and anxiety is an important element in the learning process, means questions of feelings, power, and authority become embedded in the curriculum. Risks are many and varied in learning groups, the expressions of powerful feelings such as anger, the risk of speaking

or not speaking, the risk of leading, fear and anxiety all have important implications for a programme, and students are actively encouraged to work with these issues as they surface.

In other contexts, for example organizational learning, leadership/organizational development, various studies have examined the impact of CAL, particularly in relation to how emotions, power and politics can both enable and constrain the learning process. A key insight is that the relationship between learning and organizing is bound up with complex internal, interpersonal and social processes and dynamics, and particularly with emotions and politics generated through attempts to learn within organizations.

Application to action research

The relevance of critical action learning to action research is twofold. Firstly, there is shared commitment to change and a common value that knowledge should serve practice. Both CAL and action research eschew positivist and technicist approaches to research and practice, valuing praxeology instead, with its value for *phroenesis* (knowledge derived from practice and deliberation) and *praxis* (purposeful action). Hence CAL is a process in which knowledge is acquired through its relevance to the real life engagements and tensions of the participants. A critical approach encourages reflection upon experience and active experimentation rather than the transmission of accepted knowledge and expertise.

Secondly, both CAL and action research place value on knowledge gained through the inter-relationship between a researcher's developing self-knowledge and emergent insight into their organisational context, as they engage in action on meaningful issues. In this sense the critical reflection and systemic thinking found in system-psychodynamics are also seen as integral to action research by many traditions.

CAL finds application in management education and development and organization development through the integration of action-based processes of learning so as to create a synthesis of theory and practice, grounded in real world experiences through interaction with organizations. For example, learners may be encouraged to engage in a series of questions and conversations that mirror Revans' praxeology through corresponding with systems alpha, beta and gamma:

Alpha: what is the reality of my situation?

Beta: what do I need to know more about? What do I need to test out? What is my inquiry methodology?

Gamma: what am I learning about how I act in the situation? How does that knowing more about this change how I act and how I learn?

Participants are supported to challenge their assumptions, to work with ambiguity and contradiction, to acknowledge emotions provoked by the situation and the learning, and to develop greater self-awareness both of learning about practice and learning through practice. The knowledge generated may remain within the organisation or, in an action research tradition, may be connected and made more widely available.

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See also

Action learning

Critical reflection

Praxis

Praxeology

Further Reading

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